The Wizard of Oz: Myth for an Age of Progress[1]

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> The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still, and shall make men sensible by the expression of his countenance, that he goes the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet.
> -- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance"[2]

In his introduction to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, author L. Frank Baum asserts the need for a series of "wonder tales" for American children. In such tales, he says,

> the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale. Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incident.[3]

Baum wants his book to be something new: a new kind of fairy tale for a new kind of child. Generations of critics, however, have found something more than "only entertainment" in *The Wizard*; they have found a moral, if not a "fearsome" one.[4] Baum may have intended simply to provide entertainment, but he does not avoid making moral judgments. Wickedness is defined as clearly and suppressed as effectively in Oz as it is in the old fashioned fairy tales. But what *is* the moral of Baum's tale, and how do political structures and practices in Oz help us to understand it?

Since 1964, much of the discussion about the politics of Oz has been framed by Henry Littlefield's claim that the book is a "Parable on Populism." He argues that the tale is an extended satire on the politics of the 1890s, with the Scarecrow representing Midwestern farmers, the Tin Woodman standing for the industrial workers of the East, and the Cowardly Lion a caricature of William Jennings Bryan; Dorothy's silver shoes and the Yellow Brick Road represent the competing proposals over whether to monetize silver.[5] Baum's intention, according to Littlefield, is to support "Democratic Populism" of the Bryan variety, and especially the policy of "free silver."[6] This thesis and its

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[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in William H. Gilman, ed., *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 287.
[3] Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, 4 (hereafter "Baum").
[4] The literature on Baum and Oz is vast. On the theme of morality, see the Hudlin, Sackett, Hearn (in the Critical Heritage Series), Nye, Sale, Cook, and Brotman essays in the bibliography for a representative sample.
[5] Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism,"376-77.
[6] Ibid., 373.

"monetary allegory" variant have been embraced by a number of other scholars and have proven to be especially popular among economists.[7] More recent scholarship, however, has cast doubt on the Littlefield thesis.[8] The time has come for a fresh look at Oz and its politics.

I approach the tale as myth rather than satire or allegory as a way of trying to uncover Baum's political ideas – and aware that I am likely to use these terms in ways that may be problematic to students of myth. But I note that the connection between political philosophy and myth goes back at least as far as Plato's *Republic*. Plato concludes his investigation of the nature of justice with an argument for choosing the philosophic life that is supported by a myth about the soul's immortality. Such a myth can be used to explain and justify the truth, even if it is not strictly true in itself – as long as it is used by those who have the right sort of knowledge. Most people will not have knowledge, Plato believes, but opinion; and the right sort of myth can give them the right sort of opinions. Alternatively, as Plato recognized, myths can reflect and reinforce existing opinions. Whether Baum was trying to lead Americans' opinions, or simply following them, the striking thing about *The Wizard of Oz* is that it is emphatically an *American* work, whether we examine the original book, published in 1900, or the 1939 MGM musical film.[9] What makes them so? How are American values and practices reflected in *The Wizard*? How do the adventures of Dorothy and her companions fulfill Baum's intention of creating a "wonder tale" for modern children?

I

There is nothing more American than Kansas. The tale begins in the heart of the heartland, where American values are the most solid. Yet Uncle Henry and Aunt Em are scarcely living the American Dream. They appear instead to be living in a story with a "fearsome moral," for as the story begins they seem about to be defeated by the rigors of life in Kansas. Nature is unkind in Kansas; everything is gray and cheerless. For Henry and Em there is no relief from the toil and drudgery of farm life, except for Dorothy. She and Toto are the only exceptions to the general cheerlessness. Aunt Em cannot bear to hear Dorothy laugh, for her own life is joyless. Although she would never forbid Dorothy to laugh, Dorothy is a constant reminder to Aunt Em of the hopelessness of her own life. Baum is unsparing in his portrait of the human costs of life in Kansas:

> When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled, now.
> … Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.[10]

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[7] See Dighe, *The Historian's Wizard of Oz*.
[8] See the article by Hansen, "The Fable of the Allegory," and the discussion in Rogers's biography of Baum.
[9] Attebery, "Oz," in Hearn, ed. *The Wizard of* Oz, 293.
[10] Baum, 18, 20.

The land has transformed Uncle Henry and Aunt Em into an image of itself. Dorothy, however, is young and yet to be changed. As Littlefield suggests, Dorothy is an American Everyman, or at least every child, characterized by a robust common sense and a powerful optimism.[11] She has not yet lost hope or her sense of humor, and she has a generous way of accepting things on their own terms. Confronted with the many surprises in Oz, she never loses her ability to take things in stride. Nor does she ever lose her conviction that she is able to achieve her goals, if only she can find the right way.

Here, as in other parts of the story, the differences between the film and book versions of the story are revealing, and for the most part complementary.[12] In the film, life in Kansas is more than merely dreary. The hardships of nature are reinforced by hardships of an entirely human sort. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em are no less careworn in the film, but their cares are punctuated by concerns of social status. Although they have hired hands to help them work the farm, they are still clearly working class, and clearly in a precarious financial situation. Miss Gulch, on the other hand, owns "half the county."[13] Her threats against Dorothy and Toto are emblematic of the selfishness of the owning class, and of its alliance with the powers of government. She threatens "a damage suit that'll take your whole farm" and produces a Sheriff's order allowing her to take Toto.[14] Uncle Henry and Aunt Em are law abiding citizens – that is, they are not in a position to use the law to their advantage, as Miss Gulch is – and thus they are powerless to help Dorothy and Toto.

If law and economic circumstances counsel Uncle Henry and Aunt Em to passivity, so too does their religion. Aunt Em, clearly provoked by Miss Gulch, nearly crosses the line but at the last moment draws back:

> Almira Gulch ... just because you own half the county doesn't mean you have the power to run the rest of us! For twenty-three years I've been dying to tell you what I thought of you ... and now ... well – being a Christian woman – I can't say it![15]

Aunt Em's Christian forbearance contrasts with Dorothy's more direct approach:

> DOROTHY (*going suddenly berserk as she sees* MISS GULCH *coming toward her)* Oh, no – no – I won't let you take him. You go away you – ooh – I'll bite you myself!
> AUNT EM Dorothy!
> DOROTHY *(wildly)* You wicked old witch! Uncle Henry, Auntie Em! Don't let "em take Toto! Don't let her take him – please![16]

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[11] Littlefield, 375.

[12] The exception, and it is a serious one, lies in the character of Dorothy herself. As Mark West has argued persuasively, the film's Dorothy is more passive than the book's. As I suggest below, however, she is also more of a skeptic. West, "The Dorothys of Oz."

[13] Langley et al., *The Wizard of Oz: The* Screenplay, 42.

[14] Langley et al., 41.

[15] Langley et al., 42-43 (ellipses in original).

[16] Langley et al., 42.

Both religion and law seem to confirm Miss Gulch's privileged status and allow her to use that status to intimidate the rest of the population. That she would pick on the most powerless of the powerless, Toto, is only to be expected. We are encouraged to infer (although the evidence is ambiguous) that Toto is in fact innocent of the most serious charge of biting Miss Gulch, although we might be inclined to forgive him for it.[17] But the question of Toto's actual misdeeds is secondary to us, and perhaps to Miss Gulch as well. She clearly is not interested in discussing the issue or trying to settle it in a neighborly way, as she shows by brushing aside Aunt Em's sensible suggestion that Dorothy keep Toto tied up. Instead, she wants to display her power and influence.

The film, then, gives us a much more complete picture of the politics of Kansas, where malign nature, economic power, religion, and legal authority conspire to support the powerful at the expense of the powerless. In both versions, Kansas seems a place where optimism is unjustified. Hard work seems to generate only more hard work, and the ordinary individual seems trapped by circumstances and forces much greater than himself. Nature and humanity alike seem to conspire against Uncle Henry and Aunt Em to deny them their sovereignty as individuals. It is only to be expected that in such a joyless, hopeless condition, people might turn toward thoughts of escape. Aunt Em's Christianity prevents her from giving voice to her most damning thoughts about Miss Gulch; it also gives both Aunt Em and Dorothy a vision of life in a better place, "somewhere over the rainbow." Kansas is bearable to the extent it can be escaped or transcended. We can imagine a place where nature is benign and the sheriff works for the people and not the owning class. What might such a place be?

II

One of the more famous lines from the film is Dorothy's comment, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."[18] This feeling is quickly followed by an assumption: "We must be over the rainbow." Oz is a beautiful place – a visual paradise. But for all its beauty, Dorothy quickly discovers that Oz is flawed. The main problems are governmental. When Dorothy arrives, Oz is governed by witches – the good witches of the North and South and the wicked witches of the East and West – and by the Wizard. This condition has not changed for many years – just how many no one can quite tell.[19] Oz is a static society until Dorothy arrives. Although the people are prosperous, Oz is thus far "uncivilized," as the Witch of the North explains to Dorothy soon after she arrives: "In the civilized countries I believe there are no witches left; nor wizards.... But, you see, the Land of Oz has never been civilized, for we are cut off from all the rest of the world. Therefore we still have witches and wizards amongst us."[20] By killing the Wicked Witch of the East, Dorothy has begun the process of civilizing Oz, and although the process is not complete when she leaves, the trend is clear. Civilization means the

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[17] We may suspect that both parties have told self-serving versions of the story. While Dorothy says that Toto merely chases the cat, Miss Gulch claims that the dog in fact bit her – a claim which Dorothy does not deny.

[18] Langley, et al., 53.

[19] Baum's narrative is not free of problems, and this is one of them. It is difficult to see how the Wizard, coming as he did by balloon from Nebraska, could have built the Emerald City and ruled it for so long that everyone had forgotten what he looked like, especially since people in Oz seem to have longer than usual life spans. But it may be related to the lack of engagement by the people in civic life.

[20] Baum, 45.

replacement of those who have, or claim to have, more than human knowledge and power by those who have only everyday knowledge and abilities. The magic of the witches and wizard enables them to rule without the consent of those who must live under them. In every case where a change of government occurs in the book, government by force or fraud is replaced with government by consent (although they are more elective monarchies than true democracies).

Why has change been so slow to come to Oz? Why does it take Dorothy to bring it? After all, the wicked Witches' ability to harness powers beyond the range of those available to anyone else proves to be no match for the extraordinary ordinariness of Dorothy. Both witches are killed by the resourceful Dorothy – one hit with a house and the other "liquidated" – and she makes it look easy. We must assume that any one else, at any time, could have done so with equal ease, yet in spite of the oppression they have suffered, citizens in the various lands of Oz have apparently never risen in rebellion.[21] Although in some respects people in Oz appear public-spirited, they also seem complacent. For the most part, they seem to be people who work hard and mind their own business. It appears that for them the power of witches and wizards is simply given, and is not worth challenging, because of their claims to magical powers. Part of this, no doubt, is simple prudence: those who lack magic abilities dare not test others' claims of power, lest they turn out to be true. It is easier simply to believe and accept, especially if one enjoys a comfortable living.

The kind of government held by the Witches and the Wizard is difficult to acquire but easy to hold onto once acquired, as the Wizard illustrates.[22] To gain political authority in such a state, one must acquire the power that the witches have, or that the Wizard claims to have. We may take for granted that one who actually has magical powers may take political power for herself if she desires it. But what of someone who claims to have magical powers but does not? The action of the book and film alike center on the discovery that Wizard has sustained his rule in Emerald City by means of fraud. Even the witches have not tried to displace him, because he has persuaded them, in the Witch of the North's words, "He is more powerful than all the rest of us together."[23] Like the Cowardly Lion, the Wizard has learned to roar in a way that frightens his subjects and his potential enemies without provoking a test of strength. He knows that the good witches are not likely to threaten him; eliminating the wicked witches solves his main foreign policy problem.

The Wizard has convinced the inhabitants of the Emerald City to treat his very name with reverence, but he has done so by a series of lies. Their belief that he is wise and good is sufficient for them. They do not inquire about whether their beliefs are correct, or ever test the Wizard's claims about his powers. Although he claims to rule in the best interests of the citizens, they never appear to have questioned whether that is true, or inquired about what their interests might be. They are satisfied with his rule because they assume that his authority is based on powers or knowledge that they cannot acquire for themselves. Dorothy and her companions expose the Wizard for a fraud. We discover that he knows only what others can know, but that like successful charlatans in

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[21] The Wicked Witch of the East "has held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day." Baum, 38, 40.

[22] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 4.

[23] Baum, 45.

all ages he has a knack for finding the weak places in people's self-estimates and exploiting them. The people's fear of his anger, and the Witches' fear of his power, are sustained by judicious but sparing demonstrations, but above all by clouding himself in mystery. By isolating himself the Wizard can maintain his reputation, and it is only when he finds in Dorothy a way of combating the power of the Wicked Witch of the West that he makes the fatal mistake of exposing himself too fully.

The Wizard's power is nothing more than the power of opinion. He has been able to manipulate and intimidate the people so that his power remains unchallenged. There is no wizard, only the apparatus of wizard-making. Behind the illusion is simply a "common man" who managed to exploit the people's superstitious beliefs. In other words, Baum has here shown us a myth within a myth – one that undermines the authority, or at least the political salience, of myth itself. And we can understand why: the Wizard is more of a threat to popular government than is the real power of the witches, because he makes the people agents of their own deception. Thus unmasking the Wizard's fraud reinforces for modern children a fundamental principle of democratic citizenship, the responsibility to scrutinize the activities of those in positions of power. Those who try to hide from the public may not turn out to be as powerful, or as benevolent, as they would like us to believe.

Democratic politics assume that the people can learn to see through the tricks of humbugs and rule in their own behalf. It also assumes that there is no greater power than that of the people themselves. Dorothy and the Wizard, as Americans, share an unmistakably American recognition of the worth and dignity of individuals. But the Wizard's recognition is merely formal; his power hinges on people being aware of their individual weakness and unable to assert their collective strength. As James Madison, and later Alexis de Tocqueville, observed, even (or perhaps especially) in an individualist age, individuals feel little confidence in their own judgments when they diverge from public opinion. Acting on this insight allows him to be successful in deceiving the people of Emerald City.[24] Dorothy, on the other hand, represents individualism's more assertive or Emersonian side, the side that stands up to public opinion and challenges figures of authority In bringing this form of individualism to Oz, Dorothy will not only expose the Wizard's fraud, but will set the inhabitants on a path to government by consent.

The world over the rainbow is a world of superstition, credulity, and tyrannical government when Dorothy arrives. It suffers from recognizable problems, some of which are very similar to the problems in Kansas. As the witch says, it is not a civilized place because there are still witches and wizards among them. Dorothy's arrival begins the process by which Oz will become civilized, and although this is scarcely her intention, it comes to appear the inevitable result of her presence. The qualities of her character alone are sufficient to bring about a transformation of the political system, resulting in improved government, though not yet democracy. Dorothy has no desire to change Oz, or to remain there, but in order for her to get what she wants – her return to Kansas – Oz must change. Government by popular choice must replace government sustained by force or deception. But the Wizard's government of Emerald City raises the question whether any state, over the rainbow or not, can be free from the manipulative arts of politicians, especially if the people are able and willing to deceive themselves. The principle of consent of the governed may not be an effective guarantee of good

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[24] *The Federalist*, no. 49, 311-312; *Democracy in America*, 243-249.

government if it is practiced in a society where the old, "uncivilized" beliefs in witches and wizards persist. The causes of tyrannical government in Oz may be related to the limitations of democratic citizenship. What are the appropriate character traits for "civilized" citizenship?

The discovery of these character traits is explored in *The Wizard of Oz* through the central action of the book, Dorothy's journey to the Emerald City to consult the Wizard and her quest to carry out the task he demands of her. In the end, we discover that Dorothy has always been able to return to Kansas, but is prevented only because she does not know her own powers. Completing the Wizard's assignment requires that Dorothy discover her powers, and this self-discovery has two related parts, to be discussed in sections III and IV. First, she must become skeptical of conventional wisdom and of others' self-evaluations. That is, Dorothy must learn not to accept what she is told. She must learn to test claims of knowledge and power (or lack thereof) against her own knowledge and experience, rather than taking things on faith. By shaping Dorothy's story in this way, Baum not only reveals a profound skepticism about claims to political authority, as we have seen, but also teaches an amused and ironic detachment from both socially accepted conventions and from others' self-assessments. This detachment provides the foundation for the second step in Dorothy's discovery of her powers, which is learning self-reliance.

III

Nothing is quite what it seems in Oz, as even its youngest readers quickly learn. Most obviously relevant to this discussion is the fact that each of the main characters proves to be an ironic inversion of its reputation and/or self-image. The brainless Scarecrow is logical and thoughtful. The heartless Tin Woodman is sentimental and tender. The Cowardly Lion is brave. The mighty but shadowy Wizard is a mere con man, and the powerful Wicked Witches are easily defeated by quite ordinary means. Some characters believe themselves to be less than they are, and others want to appear to be more than they are. It turns out that most people are willing either to accept or to exploit conventional attitudes, especially those that concern their own capacities. Dorothy must learn that the characters who underestimate their powers, especially her companions, have hidden strengths, and that the characters that are reputed to be powerful, and especially the Wizard, have hidden weaknesses. She must first learn to look behind their self-assessments or self-presentations.

The first challenge to Dorothy's received opinions comes in her initial meeting with the Witch of the North. When the Witch reveals her identity, Dorothy responds with the "stereotyped" fairy tale knowledge: "But I thought all witches were wicked."[25] This view rests on the assumption that the source of the witch's power is a grant from the devil or some other malign force; but the presence of good witches in Oz suggests that Baum was aiming for a different understanding. For one thing, no powers in Oz are said to derive from unseen or outside forces, whether good or ill. Objects may have magical powers of their own (e.g., the silver shoes or the golden cap), but these are their own

[25] Baum, 40.

inherent properties, not borrowed or dependent ones.[26] Power in Oz is good or bad not according to its source (since all powers seem to come from within, especially in humans), but according to how it is used.[27] We learn subsequently that Dorothy's conventional attitude toward witches is excusable because Kansas is civilized, and the witches there died out long ago.[28] Uncivilized Oz, then, may have something to teach civilized Kansas. If nothing else, Dorothy can learn to replace her opinions about witches with knowledge derived from actual encounters with them.

Dorothy's skepticism about received wisdom grows as her experience grows. The first of her companions, the Scarecrow, has an advantage over Dorothy, in that he is not in need of unlearning accepted opinions. Having been created only "day before yesterday," the Scarecrow's mind is literally a blank slate.[29] The Scarecrow has reason, but lacks experience, and so at first he falls into every pothole along the road. His lack of experience makes it difficult for him to understand Dorothy's desire to return to Kansas, when she tries to explain it to him:

> "I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas."
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> "That is because you have no brains," answered the girl. "No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home."
>
> The Scarecrow sighed.
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> "Of course I cannot understand it," he said. "If your heads were stuffed with straw, like mine, you would probably all live in beautiful places, and then Kansas would have no people at all. It is fortunate for Kansas that you have brains."[30]

The Scarecrow's logic is inescapable, and certainly is not lost on the audience. It does not seem to be lost on Dorothy, either, who responds by changing the subject. She cannot let go of her desire for home, however illogical. But the Scarecrow's logic leads to just the sort of naïve questions Dorothy must learn to ask.

Dorothy's reliance on conventional opinion is open to an additional line of skeptical attack in the film. Her wish to be transported "someplace where there isn't any trouble" is an expression of her conventional faith in an unseen place.[31] Clearly such a place is beyond the day to day experience of her life in Kansas. Dorothy's discovery that the world "over the rainbow" is subject to many of the same problems and cares as "real life" is one of the chief lessons the film seeks to teach. We cannot wish away our troubles, and the conventional faith in an alternative place – especially if that place is thought somehow to explain or justify our lives here on earth – is not based on reliable

[26] The Golden Cap, for example, which allows its possessor to summon the Winged Monkeys three times, acquired its power because of a prank played by the monkeys on its original owner. Obedience to the summons is the monkeys' punishment for their prank. Baum, 248-251.

[27] Baum, 42 n. 16.

[28] Baum, 45.

[29] Baum, 76.

[30] Baum, 75-6. Most commentators have noted Baum's play on the adage, "be it ever so humble, there's no place like home" here.

[31] Langley, et al., 39.

information. The earth *is* home, like it or not: there may be problems in Kansas, but Kansas is not the problem. Dorothy's hope of a place where "there isn't any trouble" is quickly and cruelly dashed when the Wicked Witch of the West intrudes on the Munchkins' celebrations. The conventional opinion about "a place without any trouble" provides neither guidance nor solace for our daily lives, and may not even be true.

If being taken over the rainbow is not the answer to our troubles, might there be some other way of having them solved? Dorothy's initial hope was that her problems could be solved by going to another place. When the fulfillment of that desire proves unsatisfactory, her second hope is that her problems can be solved by the Wizard. Indeed, this hope is encouraged by everyone in Munchkinland. The good Witch and the Munchkins alike assume that the Wizard of Oz has the power to help Dorothy. The only question is his willingness to use his power on her behalf. Thus her journey to the Wizard becomes a kind of pilgrimage. The conventional wisdom is that one's most important problems can be solved by a proper approach to an overwhelmingly powerful authority, because one's own resources are insufficient.

In contrast to Dorothy's conventional views of witches or her attachment to her home, the people's faith in the Wizard's power seems well justified and hardly open to skeptical inquiry. It is grounded in real accomplishments – he built the Emerald City and has kept the Wicked Witches at bay for a long time. Faith is justified because it is a natural progression from things seen (the city) to their unseen causes (the Wizard). The evidence for the Wizard's goodness seems obvious as well, for the people are prosperous. In both the book and the film the Wizard initially appears as a God-like figure in keeping with our traditional images of divinity.[32] He is the source of all power and knowledge, infinitely good but also deeply mysterious. The film shows him as an enormous talking head suspended over an altar spewing fire and smoke. The book, more classically, presents him as a shape-shifter, appearing in different guises to Dorothy and each of her companions. The Wizard's ability to change shapes reinforces our ideas about his power, but more importantly emphasizes our inability to know him in any meaningful way.[33] At best we can know an aspect of divinity, but we cannot grasp the whole of it:

> "What is he [the Wizard] like?" asked the girl.
> "That is hard to tell," said the man [a farmer in the country outside Emerald City], thoughtfully. "You see, Oz is a great Wizard, and can take on any form he wishes. So that some say he looks like a bird; and some say he looks like an elephant; and some say he looks like a cat. To others he appears as a beautiful fairy, or a brownie, or in any other form that pleases him. But who the real Oz is, when he is in his own form, no living person can tell."[34]

The claims about the Wizard's power, which are grounded in fact, are supported by images that conform to our conventional expectations about divine things. That they will prove to be *mere* images is one of the discoveries that Dorothy must make.

In both the book and the film, at their first encounter the Wizard demands that Dorothy and her companions prove themselves worthy of the rewards they ask from him

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[32] Nathanson, *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, 179.
[33] Hudlin, in Hearn, ed. *The Wizard of Oz*, Critical Heritage Series, 455-56.
[34] Baum, 165

by killing the Wicked Witch of the West. The Wizard's favors are not bestowed as an act of grace, but must be earned: "In this country everyone must pay for everything he gets."[35] Dorothy's response to the Wizard's demand is a deep sense of disappointment, but it also contains an indication of her growing independence of mind: "... even if I wanted to, how could I kill the Wicked Witch? If you, who are Great and Terrible, cannot kill her yourself, how do you expect me to do it?"[36] Dorothy raises no objection to the Wizard's insistence that she do something in return for his favor. It is not unreasonable for him to demand a *quid pro quo*, and indeed it might be unreasonable for Dorothy to ask for an unrequited favor. But she can and does object to what he requires of her. Her question is a sensible one, after all. If the Wizard is powerful enough to send her back to Kansas, why can he not kill the Witch himself? Dorothy's doubts will be amply confirmed by the end of her journey.

In the film, Dorothy is more openly skeptical of the Wizard from the beginning, and indeed the Munchkins themselves plant the doubts when they sing: "You'll find he is a Whiz of a Wiz/*If ever a Wiz there was*/If ever, oh ever a Wiz there was..."[37] This is a theme Dorothy herself picks up later when she cautions her companions: "*If* the Wizard is a wizard who will serve."[38] Her most openly skeptical comment on the Wizard, however, comes at the gate of the Emerald City itself. Here, it is useful to contrast the film and the book. The book's version of the encounter is this:

> [Guardian of the Gates] "What do you wish in the Emerald City?"
> "We come here to see the Great Oz," said Dorothy.
> The man was so surprised at this answer that he sat down to think it over.
> "It has been many years since anyone asked me to see Oz," he said, shaking his head in perplexity. "He is powerful and terrible, and if you come on an idle or foolish errand to bother the wise reflections of the Great Wizard, he might be angry and destroy you all in an instant."
> "But it is not a foolish errand, nor an idle one," replied the Scarecrow; "it is important. And we have been told that Oz is a good Wizard."[39]

And from the film:

> DOORMAN: ... Now, state your business.
> ALL *(together):* We want to see the Wizard!
> DOORMAN *(so shocked that he almost falls)* Oh – oh – the Wizard? Ah – but nobody can see the Great Oz! Nobody's ever seen the Great Oz! Even *I've* never seen him!
> DOROTHY *(guilelessly)* Well, then, how do you know there is one?
> DOORMAN Because – he ... ah .. b – I – oh – *(unable to think of a good reason)* You're wasting my time![40]

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[35] Baum, 188; cf. Brotman, "A Late Wanderer in Oz," 160.
[36] Baum, 189.
[37] Langley, et al., 64 (emphasis added).
[38] Langley, et al., 81 (emphasis added).
[39] Baum, 170-171.
[40] Langley, et al., 88.

Film-Dorothy's guilelessly skeptical question calls into question the Doorman's certainty and immediately reveals its flimsiness, whereas book-Dorothy's question provokes a reaffirmation of the Gatekeeper's faith that is only later shown to be groundless.

Dorothy's question – "how do you know?" – is the heart of the tale's inquiry. Her skepticism about the Wizard turns out to be more justified than others' faith. Upon their return to the Emerald City to claim their rewards, the Wizard is abruptly revealed to be simply "making believe."[41] He is a humbug, if a very skillful one. The expectation that a powerful and mysterious outside force is the solution to one's problems is at least open to doubt, if we are to learn from Dorothy's experience. In Oz, and perhaps in Kansas as well, no such force exists, or if it does exist it does not respond to our requests. Those who claim to represent such forces need to be investigated carefully. "The man behind the curtain" is the guy to watch, not the blazing head above the altar.

Dorothy must sharpen her critical faculties before she can embark on her journey home. What she discovers ultimately is that there are no mysteries.[42] What seems inexplicable at first sight in the end has a perfectly simple explanation that can be discovered by rational inquiry. The first step is to understand things and people as things in their own right, and not as containing or representing unseen forces that are working in or through them. Things may not be what they seem, and people may not be what they want us to think they are. Oz and its inhabitants are there for the purpose of being discovered by Dorothy as a part of her journey toward discovering her own powers. She must become skeptical of others before she can learn to trust her own judgment.

IV

> The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do nor does he know until he has tried.[43]

The foundation of self-reliance is skepticism about the ability of other forces, whether witches, wizards, or gods, to solve one's own problems. Dorothy learns to take others' claims of power with a healthy dose of skepticism, because she can observe that no one is invincible. Having power is a matter of finding the right strategy or method. Of course, to find the right method depends first on the willingness to take action, which in turn is grounded in doubts about others' ability or willingness to help. One cannot depend on being rescued by others or on escaping to another place – these are not just illusions, but irresponsible ones, for they make one passive in the face of problems that require action. As we observed earlier, in a democracy it is essential that the people take action to solve problems, rather than accept things passively.

It is essential to Dorothy's tale that the Emerald City is never her final destination. Despite repeated urgings by her companions and others, she is resolute and single minded in her desire to return home. In this she is more like Homer's Odysseus than Bunyan's Christian, for the comforts of home and the moderate and settled life it promotes are

[41] Baum, 261.
[42] Sale, "L. Frank Baum, and Oz," 581.
[43] Emerson, 267.

paramount for her. Yet her attachment to home is confirmed by her potential independence of it; Dorothy's choice to return is made despite the Scarecrow's logical case against returning to Kansas. If anything, it reinforces her choice. Dorothy is human as well as American, and Oz is neither.[44] Unlike Christian, whose dependence on God's grace requires him to abandon his home and family, Dorothy must choose to return home to Kansas for her new-found self-reliance to appear in its proper context. The family is the foundation of human community in a "civilized" place like Kansas, and it is there, not in Oz, that Dorothy belongs.

But what will she take with her back to Kansas? Having become skeptical about others' powers, Dorothy and her companions must learn to become confident in their own capacities to solve their problems. We may observe that they have much to learn about self-reliance from the Wizard's example, and not just from his precepts. Dorothy and the others must learn what the Wizard already knows and practices: how to make the best use of one's talents and opportunities, however modest they might be. The Wizard may be a charlatan, but he is a *successful* charlatan, and there is much to be learned from his success. He has, after all, been a good ruler in Oz. While in the film he found the Emerald City ready-built, in the book he was in fact the city's builder. In both accounts he is responsible for the harmony and prosperity the residents enjoy: if laws that allow the people to "laugh the day away" are not good laws, they certainly seem an acceptable substitute.[45] That he seems to the people an impersonal, mysterious, or even unknowable force reinforces their perception of his benevolence but also puts his laws beyond the reach of controversy or question. We may wonder whether the laws would be received in the same way from a lawgiver who is known. Clearly the Wizard himself is concerned about this, for he worries about being in "terrible trouble" if his deception is uncovered.[46]

Like Plato's philosopher-kings, the Wizard has created good laws for the sake of the people's happiness, but they rest on a fundamental, if well-intended, deception. It is only a lucky accident that allows Dorothy and her companions to penetrate the deception, and learn that he is only a "common man," if a "very good one."[47] But even though he is "a very bad Wizard," the Wizard does have wisdom of a sort, and it is precisely this wisdom that Dorothy needs. The boastful Wizard in fact has a self-knowledge superior to that of anyone else in the story. His combination of skepticism and self-reliance is the model that she must imitate if she wishes to return home. We must ask, then, what does the Wizard know?

We may start with an inventory of his talents. He is a balloonist and ventriloquist, and he has enough practice with some practical arts of construction that he can create the different illusions shown to Dorothy and the others. Back home in Nebraska (he is from Omaha), these talents serve in the circus, but would hardly be considered a qualification for political power. But Oz is "uncivilized" and therefore his unexplained appearance

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[44] Tocqueville had noted the central importance of home and family to Americans, and observed that this home-centeredness contributed substantially to the maintenance of good mores. He argued that the education of young women to a sense of equality and independence was an important factor in this (Tocqueville, 563ff). It seems that for Baum self-reliance is grounded in a sense of knowing one's home in the same way that it is for Emerson (cf. Emerson, 287-88).

[45] Langley, et al., 90: "We get up at twelve and start to work at one,/Take an hour for lunch and then at two we're done." Things are not that good even in France.

[46] Baum, 263.

[47] Baum, 261, 270.

among the people creates an instant impression of great power, just as Dorothy's has. Unlike Dorothy, however, he is in no hurry to get home. He is selfish enough to exploit the people's impression of his power; clearly he also has a talent for recognizing an opportunity when one presents itself. He is able to leverage his modest talents into unchallenged political power, relying only on his own thorough understanding of others to keep him secure.

The book gives a demonstration of how Dorothy might have reproduced the Wizard's feat in her dialogue with the Munchkin farmer Boq. Boq tells Dorothy that she must be a "great sorceress," but Dorothy does not reply because she cannot figure out how to persuade him of the truth.[48] The Wizard does not let the truth get in his way. The key to his success is the Wizard's understanding of others' need for reassurance and their capacity for self-deception:

> Oz, left to himself, smiled to think of his success in giving the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion exactly what they thought they wanted. "How can I help being a humbug," he said, "when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can't be done? It was easy to make the Scarecrow and the Lion and the Woodman happy, because they imagined I could do anything."[49]

People in Oz, and perhaps people in Kansas as well, prefer their own imaginings, in the form of a comfortable and familiar falsehood, to the reality of an uncomfortable truth, and the Wizard's power is grounded in this observation. Baum makes clear to his readers that this human tendency is in tension with the needs of democratic government, which is undermined by the belief that those in power can "do anything." The Wizard takes this insight one step further. He has not only given the people an illusion; he has reinforced it by staying out of the public eye. The less that is known, we may surmise, the better – let the public fill in the blanks with their own speculations.[50] We must therefore add to his list of talents that he knows when to remain silent.

It appears that the Scarecrow has absorbed the Wizard's lesson, for as soon as he gets his new brains, he begins to keep his ideas to himself. Unlike the film, where the Scarecrow shows off his new brain (badly), in the book he promises to show off, but does not: "The Scarecrow told them there were wonderful thoughts in his head; but he would not say what they were because he knew no one could understand them but himself."[51] He has learned that ideas that are not expressed cannot be challenged. His new reliance is not so much on his own brain power as on his understanding of the limits of others' understandings. Like the Wizard he knows that what is not seen is not questioned. Perhaps it is because he has shown this talent for humbuggery that the Wizard chooses the Scarecrow to rule over Emerald City during his absence.

The overt and explicit lesson Dorothy and her companions receive from the Wizard is that they have within themselves the resources to solve their problems. Again and again in the story they demonstrate their own capacities and strengths, yet they still

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[48] Baum, 61-63.
[49] Baum, 283.
[50] Here we may be minded of Bagehot's advice not to let daylight in upon the magic of the British monarchy.
[51] Baum, 285; cf. 277.

doubt whether they have the virtues they have displayed. They are too skeptical of themselves, and not skeptical enough about others. The Wizard, however, easily convinces the three companions that they in fact have the virtues they seek, even after he has been exposed as a fraud. They need to be convinced because for them it is not enough to possess the virtues, or even to use them. They desire the badges or symbols – the reputation – for the virtues. They have made the mistake of imagining themselves without qualities they in fact possess, and must rely on an authority figure, however tarnished, to provide them with an equally imaginary reassurance. None of Dorothy's companions really learns the lesson that Dorothy herself learns, or that the audience learns from them. The Wizard's "gifts" to the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Cowardly Lion are silly – not just symbols, but cheap and tacky ones. He cannot, in fact, give them anything, and everyone knows it but the characters themselves.[52]

Dorothy, however, is not seeking reassurance or comfort from the Wizard, but action; this is ultimately why he cannot help her, and why her companions cannot either. In the book, while Dorothy welcomes the assistance of her companions, she is not much concerned with their motivations for seeking the Wizard, and indeed is strikingly indifferent even as to their success. Early on, while the Woodman and the Scarecrow debate whether brains or heart is more important:

> Dorothy did not say anything, for she was puzzled to know which of her two friends was right, and she decided if she could only get back to Kansas and Aunt Em it did not matter so much whether the Woodman had no brains and the Scarecrow no heart, or each got what he wanted.
>
> What worried her most was that the bread was nearly gone....[53]

If Dorothy's indifference here seems rather cruel, however, it is matched by her companions' complacency once they come to believe they have been granted their requests. Satisfied with themselves, they urge Dorothy to be satisfied also: "'If Dorothy would only be contented to live in the Emerald City,' continued the Scarecrow, 'we might all be happy together.'"[54] Clearly, inertia is getting the better of them. Dorothy quickly and firmly brushes aside the temptation: "'But I don't want to live here,' cried Dorothy. 'I want to go to Kansas, and live with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry.'"[55]

It is only at this point – the final set of adventures in the book, which are omitted in the film – that Dorothy's companions act on her behalf, rather than their own. Until this point, it seems clear that what helps any member of the group helps all, a perspective which the film retains throughout. That is, it is in the self-interest of each member of the group to have the whole group succeed. But in the book once the other members achieve their goals, however illusory, they must *choose* to help Dorothy, and thus keep their end of the bargain with one another. Dorothy, of course, has every reason to insist that they keep to the compact, and can remind them that they would not have achieved their own goals without her. More importantly for the audience, by helping Dorothy, the companions' virtues begin to look like real virtues, exercised for the sake of others and

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[52] Cf. Hearn's comments and the sources he cites; Baum, 271, n. 17.
[53] Baum, 102.
[54] Baum, 296, 299.
[55] Baum, 299.

not merely instrumental for gaining their own ends. This realization helps us understand that the Wizard's version of self-reliance is problematic, because it rests on exploiting the weaknesses of others for his own purposes. As we observed earlier, power in Oz, which is always derived from within oneself, is good or bad according to its uses. The Wizard's use of his limited natural abilities is clever but ultimately bad because it is selfish. What sort of person would send a child on a mission to kill a powerful Witch, after all? The Scarecrow, Woodman, and Lion have the makings of good rulers only when they overcome their own selfish complacency and agree to help Dorothy find the Witch of the South.

As we know, Dorothy also has the powers she claims to seek from the Wizard, since the silver shoes/ruby slippers have the power to transport her home. But in contrast to the situation of her companions, the Wizard does not know Dorothy's powers, and cannot "grant" them by making a symbolic gift. No one else has the power to send her back to Kansas. Dorothy's discovery, then, completes the lesson that modern children must learn: Regardless of how difficult it may seem to achieve one's goals, one must rely on oneself to achieve them. It is possible for the Wizard to show the Scarecrow, the Woodman, and the Lion that they have the qualities they seek, only because they have already displayed them. They had achieved their goals, and needed only the testimonials. Dorothy, too, must find her powers in herself, but her discovery is more complicated. Her resourcefulness and pluck along her journey lead to discovering the power of the silver shoes. Metaphorically, her powers have been right under her feet all along, but she did not know how to use them.

The key to self-reliance is learning how to use one's own powers; in this respect the Wizard is a good teacher both by his example and by his precepts. The Wizard *is* wise in one critical respect: he has the ability to measure his own and others' capacities. He is able to guide Dorothy and her companions to discover their own abilities and learn to rely on them to achieve their goals. But if the Wizard points to the possibilities of the self-reliant American spirit as the builder of cities and understander of souls, he also illustrates its limitations. His selfish eagerness to build Emerald City and secure his position in it leads him to govern without the consent of the governed. He is at best indifferent to forms of government, even if the government he provides is good. While Baum clearly has sympathy for the Wizard's brand of self-reliance, he is also very much aware that the Wizard's actions are not entirely honest. He thus illustrates one side of the problem with self-reliance as a principle. The Wizard's self-reliance is based on pure self-interest, and leads him to dupe others. But the other side of self-reliance is represented by Uncle Henry and Aunt Em. They have worked very hard and have established a precarious kind of independence, but their independence is conditional upon more powerful forces, both natural and human. Rooted in the land, they have become indistinguishable from it. Dorothy, and her generation, must steer a course that avoids a dishonest selfishness on the one hand, and a hard working but futile dependence on the other. Dorothy symbolizes the self-reliant, entrepreneurial, restless, active American spirit, the spirit of the children of an age of progress.

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The moral of Dorothy's story is the extraordinary power of the ordinary person. This is the new message for modern children that Baum's "wonder tale" brings. Every

person has inherent talents or abilities that he or she needs to recognize; and every person also needs to learn to be skeptical of conventional wisdom and of others' claims about their own powers. These are the grounds of self-reliance. As developed by Baum, echoing Emerson, self-reliance is above all the awareness of the extraordinary uniqueness of each individual. This Emersonian celebration of the extraordinariness of the ordinary is what has kept *The Wizard of Oz* a central part of American mythology.

It is interesting that Dorothy, as the prototype child Baum is hoping to reach, is not characterized by a sense of "wonder," at least not in the Aristotelian sense. She does not generally ask "why?" about things, but accepts them for what they are and examines them in practical terms for their usefulness to her. Dorothy is open-minded, tolerant, skeptical, and self-reliant, but she is not, for all that, terribly curious about why things are as they are.[56] Instead, she acts. She is clear and firm in her objective: she wants to go home, and nothing will deflect her from that. She does not care how or why the situation is what it is, but she is determined to change it.

Dorothy brings civilization to Oz, and at least the beginnings of democracy. She has a transforming effect on Oz that is in sharp contrast to her Uncle and Aunt in Kansas. While Uncle Henry and Aunt Em have been transformed by Kansas to the point where they blended in to the dry, gray landscape itself, Dorothy begins to remake Oz into something more like her – something that begins to seem recognizably American. As an American, she carries her home with her wherever she goes. Her transformation of Oz may give us some hope that Dorothy will in turn transform Kansas. After all, Dorothy's qualities are the ones that are needed for success in a progressive society. Progress depends on questioning conventional views and having the self-reliant spirit to make one's own fortune. If the message of the older fairy tales was "trust authority," Baum's message to modern children is "trust yourself."

The wonder in Baum's wonder-tale is provided by the Wizard, who is "Wonderful," or full of wonders. But the Wizard's talent is chiefly a shrewd sense of how to manipulate people. We might put it more politely and say he knows how to motivate them. He knows that the things people ask of him are impossibilities, and so he shows them how to find the resources in themselves to make the impossible become real. The wonder in this tale is the wonder of self-reliance. This is a particular wonder for children, who as they grow discover their own new capacities and new possibilities. Children in a progressive age need to be self-reliant, not obedient. They need to discover the wonders within themselves – the very wonders that the Wizard helps Dorothy and her companions to find.

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[56] Cf. Tocqueville's comments on "the Philosophic Method of the Americans," in volume 2, part 1 of *Democracy in America*, 403ff.

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